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HEALTHCARE

CEO Jamie Ulmer with leave Heart of Florida after four years of bridging health care gaps



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When Heart of Florida Health Center Jamie Ulmer first started at the job in 2018, the nonprofit health center saw about 19,000 patients annually. Four and a half years later, there are 30,000 each year.

In that time, the operating budget has grown from about \$12 million to \$30 million, not including a \$35 million contract with the Marion County Sheriff's Office to provide health care to jail inmates, plus another \$2 million over three years to provide care for county employees.

"I think we went from a small community health center to a formidable, powerhouse, high quality primary care center for everyone," he said in his office on Friday.

Animal care: New University of Florida Veterinary Hospital opens at World Equestrian Center in Ocala

Helping the community: Ocala churches team up with CarePortal to help children in need of clothes, beds and more

Keep Marion County clean: Commissioners gets serious about littering/illegal dumping, consider big boost in fines

In addition to increasing the number of low-income and uninsured or underinsured patients HFHC sees, Ulmer has moved and improved the nonprofit's headquarters, led the organization through a pandemic and opened four pharmacies.

With a growing list of accomplishments that have changed Marion County's health care landscape, Ulmer has decided to move on and share his vision with another community in

southwest Florida, where he hopes to continue decreasing gaps in health care.

Bridging the gaps in health care

As a Federally Qualified Health Center, HFHC provides care to underserved communities, offering affordable services on a sliding fee scale at several locations throughout Marion County.

Reflecting on four and a half years of service, his proudest accomplishment is bridging gaps in care for those who need it.

“Health centers are known for doing more with less,” he said. “But what we did over the last four and a half years was beyond that. We had to take a few steps backwards to take a whole lot of steps forward, and it paid off. I think we took some calculated risks that were very significant for our patients.”

Most notable was taking essentially every penny they had to buy the new headquarters in 2020 in the old Albertson’s building at 2553 E. Silver Springs Blvd., Ocala. The benefits of the initial risk are seen every day in the families who come for primary care, maternity care, gynecology, dentistry, behavioral health and pharmaceutical needs.

“We’ve closed the gaps with people who don’t have insurance or who are from an underserved population with a facility that’s just as nice or nicer than where (millionaires and billionaires) go,” he said. “That’s what we do. We close gaps in a community.”

Creating a team of health care 'soldiers'

That includes leading the organization through a pandemic. His team provided over 50,000 vaccines, 20,000 COVID-19 tests and over 500 monoclonal antibody treatments.

Ulmer is also proud to have renewed HFHC’s relationships with Marion County, the Marion County Board of County Commissioners, the Florida Department of Health in Marion County, the United Way of Marion County, AdventHealth Ocala and HCA Florida Hospital Ocala.

Though Ulmer has been a visionary and executer for the health center, he hasn’t done it alone. He is proud of his “ride-or-die” employees who have put “literal blood, sweat and tears” into creating HFHC’s clinics.

Having served in the United States Army for over 24 years, he compared his team to soldiers who deployed to another country and put on their rucksacks for a mission to increase health care.

“He took us to the next level, and I think the relationship he’s built with each one of his leadership staff has been special,” Marketing and PR Director Heather James said. “(He) encouraged us to believe in ourselves and our positions and what we do, and he wants the best for us personally and professionally.”

Board of directors will conduct search for new CEO

Ulmer revealed that he will be heading to Naples to join the Healthcare Network of Southwest Florida in Collier County, also a Federally Qualified Health Center.

“I think God told me it was time for me to move to another community that had some of the similar struggles, and I believe it was that kind of tap on my shoulder to say, ‘Hey, you’ve done great. It’s time for you to move,’ “ he said. “I found that this community is just similar to Marion County when it comes to gaps in care but on a larger scale.”

Another signal came in a handful of awards that HFHC received in the span of a week recently, including the Marion County Children’s Alliance’s 2022 Dr. Mike Jordan Award of Excellence, the United Way of Marion County’s 2021 Community Impact Champions for Public & Community Services Award and the Office of the Secretary of Defense’s Patriot Award.

“To me, that was the message: ‘OK, you’ve done your deed here. You’ve done your good. It’s time to apply that to another community,’ ” he said.

Chief Operating Officer Maria Torres, whom Ulmer describes as resilient and someone who leads by example, will be the interim CEO following his departure on June 24.

“I expect that the board of directors will hire someone who’s very, very progressive, innovative and will continue to move the organization forward in a very positive way for this entire community,” Ulmer said, noting he expects the board to conduct a national search, or it may choose to hire from within.

In addition to thanking his staff, Ulmer expressed gratitude to his board of directors.

“They literally said, ‘OK, Jamie, here’s the helm. Go do what you do,’ “ he said. “They never held me back. I would hope that they don’t hold the next CEO back. Let them go.”

Ulmer will continue to help Heart of Florida and other health centers

Even though his time with HFHC is winding down, there are many things on the horizon for the health center.

The organization may have the opportunity to provide health care to The Villages and Sumter County in the future. In Marion County, hundreds of thousands of dollars are going toward expanding the Dunnellon clinic. Dental care is coming to the Belleview facility.

One area Ulmer hopes HFHC will continue improving is access to specialty care, making it easier for patients who otherwise don't have the means.

Though he won't be in Marion County anymore, Ulmer will still be a part of "the community health center movement," as he is on multiple state and national community health center committees and boards, such as the Florida Association of Community Health Centers.

"When I'm sitting in these national and state meetings, I'm always going to be applying principles and policies that impact Heart of Florida Health Center in a positive way in this community even though I may not be here," he said.

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